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United for Quality Care

Testimony of Deborah Chernoff, Communications and Public Policy Director  
The New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199  
Before the Aging Committee, Tuesday, March 4, 2014

Supporting:

HB 5350, ***AN ACT CONCERNING AN ASSISTANT TO THE LONG-TERM CARE OMBUDSMAN***

Good morning, Senator Ayala, Representative Serra and other members of the Aging Committee. My name is Deborah Chernoff and I am the Communications and Public Policy Director for the state's largest union of health care workers, District 1199/SEIU. I also serve on the state's Long Term Care Advisory Committee and it is in both of those capacities that I offer testimony today supporting HB 5350.

More than 6,000 of our union members, including nurses, nursing assistants, laundry, housekeeping, dietary and other support staff provide care and support for the residents of Connecticut's nursing homes and their families. We are keenly aware, therefore, of the many changes to long term care that are evolving in the nature and operation of skilled nursing homes. Our members are even more keenly aware of the challenges arising from those changes.

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman's office is unique in its ability to advocate for and protect the rights of those residing in our nursing homes. This is a function quite distinct from evaluating the quality of the health care provided -- it cuts to the heart of what it means to be a nursing HOME, one in which residents feel respected, are accorded dignity and can maintain a sense of autonomy.

That has long been the mission of the Ombudsman's office and one to which, in our observation, Nancy Shaffer and her staff have been dedicated and effective in carrying out. However, it is clear that the need is both great and growing and the resources too scarce to meet that need. The growth of Assisted Living, the increased complexity and of medical, psychological and physical needs among nursing home residents, and the by-now-well-known demographic "grey tsunami" are all factors in that growing need -- and the necessity of our taking steps, as a state, to expand the resources available.

We have also seen a number of crisis situations develop in the last few years, with nursing homes announcing closure or bankruptcy based on financial instability and, in at least one case, fraud and malfeasance regarding the use of Medicaid money intended for resident care. No matter what the reason, the closure of a nursing home is a traumatic event -- certainly for the staff who are losing their jobs, but far more so for the residents who are

facing eviction from the place they regard as home, disconnection from their local community, and disruption to their relationships with both staff and other residents. In these situations, which have happened all too often recently, it is the Ombudsman's office that can inform residents of their rights, protect them from being rushed out the door without any real chance to consider or choose, and remind all of us that residents' rights, peace of mind and autonomy should never be secondary considerations but should remain front and center in our policy and practice.

The creation of the position of Assistant to the Long-Term Care Ombudsman is a small, but important, step toward recognizing the vital nature of this work and beginning to meet the growing and changing need. The members of our union, especially the nurses and nursing assistants in Connecticut nursing homes, do the hands-on daily care and interact with residents and their families. There are far too few of us, however, to do all that could and should be done around ensuring that Connecticut complies with both the spirit and letter of the Older Americans Act and other measures designed to protect the autonomy, peace of mind and fundamental rights of our parents and grandparents, friends and neighbors and fellow citizens who reside in nursing homes.

Because it is good public policy, because it is consistent with our strong advocacy on behalf of the residents we care for, and because it is the right first step to take, we strong urge that you pass HB 5350.

Thank you.